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SUBJECT: A SNAPSHOT OF BAKU'S IDP COMMUNITIES

REF: Baku 439

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1. (SBU) Over the next few months, the Embassy plans to take a closer at Azerbaijan's internally displaced persons (IDP) population, estimated at roughly 675,000 persons. The GOAJ has pledged to close all existing tent camps by the end of 2007, but hundreds of thousands of IDPs still live in very difficult conditions. On June 4, Pol/Econ staff traveled with local representatives of UMCOR (United Methodist Crisis Organization for Relief) to IDP settlements in and near Baku to gain a better sense of IDPs' living conditions. In FY07, the Department provided USD 261,000 in funding for UMCOR IDP programs; U.S. donors also provided medicinal and non-medicinal goods worth \$754,480. Most of the IDPs in the Baku-area settlements are from Kelbajar and Lachin; a few are from Shusha, Agdam and Barda. This is the first in a series of reports that we plan to complete over the summer.

#### Difficult Living Conditions

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2. (U) More than three hundred IDP families live in the Yasamal district of Baku. Most live in a tightly-packed cluster of crumbling Soviet-era school buildings and hostels, belonging to a former technical university. Garbage and pieces of construction material were strewn everywhere, and dense thickets of electrical wires and broken glass littered the common areas. The air outside smelled unhealthy, and there were pools of stagnant water everywhere. Some families are lucky enough to live in the buildings, but others live in lean-tos, built out of sheets of aluminum and cardboard boxes. Buzzing wires and long lines of laundry are strung between the buildings, including rows of frequently rewashed and reused children's diapers.

3. (U) The conditions inside the buildings of the Yasamal settlement were not much better. Each apartment building has four or five floors, with only one, filthy toilet on each floor (an arrangement common to most IDP settlements). Each two-bedroom apartment hosts anywhere from two to five families, with between four and seven people residing in each bedroom. As a result of the high occupancy, several hundred people share the same toilet.

4. (U) UMCOR makes regular visits to two IDP settlements in Baku's Nizami District. At one of these sites, several IDP families reside in spare rooms in a partially abandoned heating and cooling plant, in conditions just as grim as in Yasamal. Many children live in this "boiler plant," many of whom were born in the IDP settlements, and some of whom appeared to suffer from severe birth defects. One girl appeared to be autistic; another had severe cerebral palsy, and yet others suffered from partial vision and hearing loss, a condition that UMCOR staff said was probably brought on by malnutrition. "How can

a child grow up here?" one IDP woman at the Fizuli site asked. "We adults, we at least remember the fresh air of Lachin and Kelbajar. These children, the settlements are all they've ever known. How can they hope?" She gestured around the dismal conditions. "There's nothing for them here."

15. (U) IDPs at both Nizami sites complained that the GOAJ did not provide utilities. In a response to question about gas and water services, one IDP said, "You have to pay bribes for everything, and we have no money. We have nothing; everything we had is back in Lachin." UMCOR staff recounted a similarly grim story: one family saved for fifteen years in order to pay the bribes necessary to secure GOAJ documentation entitling them, as IDPs, to subsidized gas. Once the family had saved enough money to pay the bribe, the GOAJ cut gas benefits to IDPs and the family ended up without gas - or the financial resources to pay the new, unsubsidized rates.

16. (U) IDPs at the second of the two Nizami sites reside in what UMCOR staff called "half-buildings" - hollow shells of buildings that appear to be partially destroyed. In reality, they are buildings that were partially complete when the IDPs moved into them fifteen years ago but have deteriorated with time. UMCOR staff reported that many of the Nizami IDPs suffered from malnutrition. Two women, their teeth completely rotted-out and their cheeks hollow with lack of decent nutrition, pointed out a number of other women in similar situations. In another part of the building, an IDP pointed out one older woman and one older man, whose rapidly accelerating dementia, she said, was exacerbated by lack of decent nutrition. A little girl at a different Nizami site languished in what appeared to be a child's crib, her legs contorted and her eyes glazed white, with only a teenaged older sister to care for her.

17. (U) The final settlements on the itinerary were the "Gizil-Gum" and "Gilavar " Sanatoriums, in the Sabunchi District. More than 300

BAKU 00000725 002 OF 003

IDP families live at each of these two sites, in abandoned Soviet summer spas located on the shores of the Caspian. What was once a brightly painted luxury hotel is now the hollow, gutted home to IDPs in extremely difficult conditions. Like in the other settlements, IDPs here could be found hunched over tiny electric hot-plates, heating a lump of potatoes no bigger than a man's fist in order to feed five or six people. (IDPs in the Fizuli settlements described frequently having to dig through the trash to find scraps of food.)

#### Health Care and Education

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18. (U) The medical care that these IDPs can receive is extremely limited; as a result, they are overwhelmingly grateful for what UMCOR is able to provide. The Azerbaijani government is supposed to provide free healthcare to IDPs, but IDPs who arrive at free clinics report that must pay a hefty bribe in order to receive the barest of care. UMCOR staff report that, as a result, men, women and children alike are constantly fighting off rashes and scabies, as well more serious diseases, such as tuberculosis. One IDP brought out her child, whom the Azerbaijani government had pronounced as "sure to die" two years ago. Now, thanks to U.S. medicines distributed by UMCOR, the girl had lived, and thanks to body braces provided by UMCOR's traveling doctor, the girl was able to walk.

19. (U) Reproductive health, too, is a serious problem. While the issue is still somewhat stigmatized, IDPs we spoke to were very open about the problems they had encountered, both in terms of contraception and in terms of diseases. One woman described to in great detail a painful uterine surgery she'd been able to receive through UMCOR -- a surgery she never would have received otherwise. UMCOR staff reports that AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases are serious problems in the IDP settlements, particularly for men who go to Russia in order to find work, and return having brought with them diseases carried by Russian prostitutes. UMCOR has public health education programs but reports that IDP women find it difficult to persuade their husbands to even talk about the subject.

110. (U) Not all IDP children are able to attend school. Though GOAJ

has established schools in some areas, many are in disrepair, and funding for these schools is restricted. In some settlements enterprising IDPs (many of whom have extensive educations themselves) appear to have made it a point to set up makeshift schools for IDP children. Still, IDPs can afford schoolbooks no more than they can afford food, so the classroom experience is necessarily extremely limited.

#### Views on the Government

¶11. (U) IDPs in the Absheron settlement complained about the lack of work and generally poor living conditions. One IDP woman said, "We can't even think about work. Our health is so poor, and the conditions so bad. We can't think about schools, because when it rains our apartments flood, and all the children are sick." The IDPs complained that the GOAJ was not responsive to their concerns; one said that "it's been years since anyone from our settlement has even laid eyes on anyone from the Azerbaijani Government." In contrast, the IDPs were extremely grateful for the assistance provided by UMCOR and the United States Government.

#### Views on Repatriation

¶12. (SBU) One UMCOR volunteer said that the IDPs still appear to believe that they will return to their settlements, but that their enthusiasm has faded in recent years. Many IDPs spoke at length about their homes in Nagorno Karabakh; rather than simply describing their poor living conditions in the settlements, IDPs almost always contrasted the Baku settlements to their former homes in areas such as Lachin and Kelbajar. "The air here is terrible, the water is terrible," one IDP woman said. "It is worse because I remember the clean air and water of my home in the mountains." While most IDPs appear to believe that a return is forthcoming, it was difficult for some IDPs to imagine any repatriation without the government doing something at the same time to address their substandard living conditions.

#### COMMENT

¶13. (SBU) UMCOR's work in these settlements clearly is making a difference in IDPs' lives. UMCOR volunteers, Azerbaijani themselves, make constant trips to the settlements, delivering packages of basic food items, as well as hygiene kits and school kits. UMCOR-sponsored doctors step in where government doctors do

BAKU 00000725 003 OF 003

not, making rounds and distributing medicine to populations stricken by tuberculosis, malaria, and a variety of ailments. USG funding is key to UMCOR's operations; without USG assistance, many of these "invisible IDPs" would slip between the cracks.

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